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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001392

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: PATRIOTIC UNION OF KURDISTAN MOVING CAUTIOUSLY
FORWARD

REF: BAGHDAD 1015

Classified By: RRT Erbil leader Jess Baily for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

11. (C) Summary: The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party, beset by internal fighting and facing leadership succession concerns, is struggling to negotiate a new, slimmed-down Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) cabinet with rival Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leaders that is acceptable to both parties. The PUK leadership is also wrestling with delays to its long-anticipated congress as the party works to update its vision and platform to meet current, post-Saddam realities. Party officials claim they need the full attention of national PUK leaders (Jalal Talabani and Barham Salih), currently focused on critical national issues, in order to stage the congress and hope to do so by September of this year. End summary.

PUK Still Reassessing Post-Saddam Reality

12. (C) In mid-April conversations with RRTOff, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party officials in Erbil and Sulaimaniyah indicated that the much-delayed PUK party congress, originally scheduled for late 2007, then for June 2008, will again likely be postponed until September. The PUK's Erbil-based representative Sadi Pire and Sarko Mahmoud, of the PUK's foreign relations office in Sulaimaniyah, independently confirmed that the party needed more time to prepare a successful meeting and pointed to three obstacles responsible for the delay. Primarily, the PUK required the full attention of national party leaders in order to stage the high-profile event effectively. With President Talabani and Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih acutely focused on national issues, including most recently the security in Baghdad and Basra, the timing was not right. PUK Politburo officials hoped for a more stable security situation by fall, though there was no guarantee that PUK leaders will be better placed to focus on party matters in a few months. Second, the congress would be the first of its kind since 2000, and the different challenges facing the party (the existing platform still calls for the "removal of Saddam" as a goal) has forced a profound recalculation of priorities that has proven difficult. A steering committee responsible for ironing out party policies and ways forward in advance of the congress has been preparing since late last year in the hope that the congress itself will be a smooth and non-contentious political exercise. Lastly, PUK officials claimed that more time was needed to coordinate the participation of party members living abroad. The PUK is taking advantage of National Democratic Institute (NDI) political party assessment and party development organization training in coordinating the preparatory work in the run up to its congress.

KRG Cabinet Talks Trudge On

13. (C) Following the April 7 reports of the reduction and consolidation of cabinet ministries, the KRG has yet to announce the names of ministers to head the reconfigured posts. PUK press reports indicated that, under the new and leaner cabinet, the PUK would hold the portfolios of energy/natural resources, interior, education, health, education, religious affairs, and construction -- with eight posts (including finance and Peshmerga) going to the KDP, and the rest to smaller opposition parties. Pire and Mahmoud indicated that the final announcement should be expected by the second week of May. Pire admitted that the time had long passed to reduce the bloated number of ministries to a workable number. The horse trading of choosing new ministers was still going on between the PUK and KDP) with the choices predicated on who best would be acceptable to both parties, and who could work best with PM Nechirvan Barzani and Deputy Prime Minister Omar Fatah. Mahmoud indicated that the KDP/PUK negotiations over the ministries of energy and finance were contentious, and that the KDP had initially expressed desire to hold both portfolios (reftel).

14. (C) The delays also reflect deep ongoing divisions within the PUK) discord that has pitted Talabani loyalists against the reformist wing led by former Deputy Secretary General Nawshirwan Mustafa. These disagreements have boiled over into the press and have pushed the party's secretary general, Talabani, to demand discipline among the PUK's ranks, threatening to sanction any party members who criticized other members or the party. Independent (and reformist-minded) daily Rozhnama published in late March an internal PUK memorandum from Talabani threatening disciplinary action against errant members who spoke publicly against the party.

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15. (C) Comment: The congress will be an important and highly-visible step in laying out the party's way forward, and the PUK wants to approach it thoughtfully. Delays likely stem from the need to have the new cabinet announced before focusing on the party platform, and suggest that the struggle to balance KDP/PUK equities, as well as frustration over the PUK's internal disunity, have been more difficult to overcome than originally expected. Looming in the background, of course, is the eventual successor to Jalal Talabani, an issue which has received less public attention than during his health struggles in 2007, but is still very much in the minds of the party faithful. End Comment.
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